

# The Listener

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Henry Grant

Lewes Crescent, Brighton. The hundredth anniversary of the incorporation of Brighton as a borough is being celebrated this week

In this number:

**Britain's Bloodless Revolution (Graham Hutton)**  
**Robert Frost, Best Loved American Poet (J. Isaacs)**  
**Bad Company (short story by Walter de la Mare)**

# The Listener

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## Short Story

## Bad Company

By WALTER DE LA MARE

**I**T is very seldom that one encounters what would appear to be sheer unadulterated evil in a human face; an evil, I mean, active, deliberate, deadly, dangerous. Folly, heedlessness, vanity, pride, craft, meanness, stupidity—yes. But even Iagos in this world are few, and devilry is as rare as witchcraft.

One winter's evening some little time ago, bound on a visit to a friend in London, I found myself on the platform of one of its many subterranean railway stations. It is an ordeal that one may undergo as seldom as one can. The glare and glitter, the noise, the very air one breathes affect nerves and spirit. One might expect strange meetings in such surroundings. On this occasion, the expectation was justified. The mind is at times more attentive than the eye. Already tired, and troubled with personal cares and problems, which a little wisdom and enterprise should have refused to entertain, I had seated myself on one of the low, wooden benches to the left of the entrance to the platform when, for no conscious reason, I was prompted to turn my head in the direction of a fellow traveller, also seated, on the fellow to my bench some few yards away. What was wrong with him? He was enveloped in a loose cape or cloak, sombre and motionless. He appeared to be quite unaware of my abrupt scrutiny, and yet I doubt it; for the next moment, although the door of the nearest coach gaped immediately opposite to him, he had shuffled into my compartment, and now in its corner, confronted me, all but knee to knee. I could have touched him with my hand. But we had suddenly come at once into an even more intimate contact than that of touch. Our eyes—his own fixed in a dwelling and lethargic stare—had instantly met, and no less rapidly mine had uncharitably recoiled, not only in misgiving, but in something little short of disgust. The effect resembled that of an acid on milk, and for the time being cast my thoughts into confusion. Yet that one glance had taken him in.

He was old—upwards of seventy; a wide-brimmed, black hat concealed his head—a head fringed with wisps of hair, lank and grey. His loose, jaded cheeks were of the colour of putty; the thin lips above the wide and dimpled chin showing scarcely a trace of red. The cloak suspended from his sloping shoulders mantled him to his shins. One knuckled, cadaverous, mittened hand clasped a thick ash stick, its handle black and polished with long usage. His only sign of life was secreted in his eyes—fixed on mine—hazed and dully glistening. There was a deliberate challenge in them, and yet, as I fancied, something more than that. They suggested that he had been in wait for me, that for him, it was almost 'well met!' For minutes together I endeavoured to accept their challenge, to make sure. Yet I realised, the while, that he was well aware of the futility of this attempt, as a snake is of the restless bird in the branches above its head. Such a statement, I am aware, must appear wildly exaggerated, but I can only record my impression. It was already lateish—much later than I had intended. The passengers came and went, and, whether intentionally or not, none consented to occupy the seat vacant beside him. I fixed my eyes on an advertisement (that of a Friendly Society, I remember!) imme-

diately above his head, with the intention of watching him in the field of an eye that I could not persuade to meet his own in full focus again.

He had instantly detected this ingenuous device. By a fraction of an inch he had shifted his grasp upon his stick. So intolerable, at length, became the physical—and psychical—effect of his presence on me that I determined to leave the train at the next station, and await the next. And at this precise moment, I was conscious that he had not only withdrawn but closed his eyes.

I was not so easily to free myself of his company. A glance behind me as, after leaving the train, I turned towards the lift showed him groping his way out of the carriage. The metal gate clanged. The lift slid upwards and, such is the contrariness of human nature, a faint disappointment followed. One may, for example, be appalled, and yet fascinated on reading an account of some act of infamous cruelty. Concealing myself as best I could at the book-stall, I awaited the next lift-load. Its few passengers having dispersed, he himself followed. In spite of age and infirmity, he *had*, then, ascended alone the spiral staircase. Glancing, it appeared, neither to right nor left, he passed through the barrier.

The collector raised his head, opened his mouth, watched his retreating figure, but made no attempt to retrieve his ticket. It was very dark now—the dark of London. In my absence underground, minute frozen pellets of snow, resembling sago, had fallen, whitening the streets and stilling the sound of the traffic. On emerging into the street, he turned in the direction of the next station—my own. Had he, or had he not, been aware that he was being watched? However that might be, my journey lay his way, although I was already later than I intended. I followed him, led on no doubt in part—well, by the effect he had had on me. Some twenty or thirty yards ahead, his dark shapelessness showed distinct against the whitened pavement.

The Thames, I was aware, lay on my left; a muffled blast from the siren of a tug announced its presence there.

Keeping my distance, I followed him on. One lamp-post, two, three. At that, he seemed to pause for a moment, momentarily glanced back, as I fancied, and vanished.

This third lamp-post vaguely illuminated the mouth of a narrow, lightless alley between highish walls. It led me, after a while into another, yet dingier. The wall on the left of this was evidently that of a large garden; on the right came a row of nondescript houses, looming up in their neglect against a starless sky.

The first of them appeared to be occupied. The next two were vacant. Dingy curtains, grey against their snowy window-sills, hung over the next. A litter of paper and refuse—abandoned by the last wind that must have come whistling round the nearer angle of the house—lay under the broken flight of steps up to the mid-Victorian porch. The small snow clinging to the bricks and to the worn and weathered cement of the wall only added to its dinginess. In the faint hope of company coming my way, and vowing that I would follow no



further than to the outlet of yet another pitch-black and uninviting alley—which might indeed prove a dead end—I turned into it. It was then I observed, in the rays of the lamp over my head, that in spite of the fineness of the snow and the brief time that had elapsed, there seemed to be no trace on its surface of recent footsteps. A faintly thudding echo accompanied me on my way.

I have found it very useful—in the country—always to carry a small electric torch in my greatcoat pocket, but for the time being I refrained from using it. This alley proved not to be blind. Beyond a patch of waste ground, a nebulous, leaden-grey vacancy marked a loop here of the Thames. I decided to go no further; and then perceived a garden gate in the wall to my right. It was ajar, but could not have long been so because no more than an instant's flash of my torch showed marks in the snow of its recent shifting; and yet there was little wind. On the other hand, here was the open river: just a breath of a breeze across its surface might account for this. The cracked and blistered paint was shimmering with a thin coat of rime—of hoar-frost, and as if a finger had but just now scrawled it there, a clumsy arrow showed, its 'V' pointing inward. A tramp, an errand-boy, mere accident might have accounted for this, or even a mark made some time before on the paint.

I paused in an absurd debate with myself, chiefly I think because I felt some little alarm at the thought of what might follow; yet led on also by the growing conviction that I had been intended to follow. I pushed the gate a little wider, peered in, and made my way up a weedy path beneath ragged, unpruned, and leafless fruit-trees towards the house. The snow's own light revealed a ramshackle flight of steps up to a poor, Frenchified sort of canopy above french windows, one half of their glazed door behind also ajar. I ascended and peered into the intense gloom beyond it. And thus and then, prepared to retrace my steps as quickly as possible, I called (in tones as near those of a London policeman as I could manage):

'Hello there! Is anything wrong? Is anyone wanted?' After all, I could at least explain to my fellow-passenger if he appeared that I had found both his gate and his window open; and the house was hardly pleasantly situated.

No answer was returned to me. In doubt and disquietude, but with a growing conviction that all was not well, I flashed my torch over the walls and furniture of the room and its heavily framed pictures. Comfort it may once have been capable of giving; in its dirt, cold, and neglect it showed little of that now. I crossed the room, paused again in the passage beyond it, and listened. I then entered the room beyond. Venetian blinds, many of the slats of which had outworn their webbing, and heavy, crimson chenille side-curtains concealed its windows. The ashes of a fire showed beyond the rusty bars of the grate under a black marble mantelpiece. An oil lamp on the table, with a green shade, exuded a stink of paraffin; and beyond, a table littered with books and papers and an overturned chair. There I could see the bent-up old legs, perceptibly lean beneath the trousers, of the occupant of the room. In no doubt of whose remains these were, I drew near, and with bared teeth and icy, trembling fingers, drew back the fold of the cloak that lay over the face. Death has a strange sorcery. A shuddering revulsion of feeling took possession of me. This cold, once genteel, hideous and neglected room—and this!

The skin of the blue, loose cheek was drawn tight over the bone; the mouth lay a little open, showing the dislodged false teeth beneath; the dull, unspeculative eyes stared out from beneath lowered lids towards the black mouth of the chimney above the fireplace. Vileness and iniquity had left their marks on the lifeless features, and yet it was rather with compassion than with horror and disgust that I stood regarding them. What cold solitude, what malignant misery must this old man, abandoned to himself, have experienced during the last years of his life; encountering nothing but enmity and the apprehension of his fellow creatures! I am not intending to excuse or even to commiserate what I cannot understand, but the almost complete absence of any goodness in the human spirit, of the remotest stirrings even of good humour and good-will cannot but condemn the heart to an appalling isolation. Had he been murdered, or had he come to a violent but natural end? In either case, horror and terror must have supervened. That I had been enticed, deliberately led on, to this discovery I hadn't the least doubt, extravagant though this, too, may seem. Why? What for?

I could not bring myself to attempt to light the lamp. Besides, in that last vigil, it must have burnt itself out. My torch revealed a stub of candle on the mantelpiece. I lit that. He seemed to have been engaged in writing when the enemy of us all had approached him in silence and

had struck him down. A long and unsealed envelope lay on the table. I drew out its contents—a letter and a will, which had been witnessed some few weeks before, apparently by a tradesman's boy and possibly some derelict charwoman, Eliza Hinks. I knew enough about such things to be sure that the will was valid and complete. This old man had been evidently more than fairly rich in this world's goods, and reluctant to surrender them. The letter was addressed to his two sisters—'To my two Sisters, Amelia and Maude'. Standing there in the cold and the silence, and utterly alone—for, if any occupant of the other world had decoyed me there, there was not the faintest hint in consciousness that he or his influence was any longer present with me—I read the vilest letter that has ever come my way. Even in print. It stated that he knew the circumstances of these two remaining relatives—that he was well aware of their poverty and physical conditions. One of them, it seemed was afflicted with cancer. He then proceeded to explain that, although they should by the intention of their mother have had a due share in her property and in the money she had left, it rejoiced him to think that his withholding of this knowledge must continually have added to their wretchedness. Why he so hated them was only vaguely suggested.

The will he had enclosed with the letter left all that he died possessed of to—of all human establishments that need it least—the authorities at Scotland Yard. It was to be devoted, it ran, to the detection of such evil-doers as are ignorant or imbecile enough to leave their misdemeanours and crimes detectable.

It is said that confession is good for the soul. Well then, as publicly as possible, I take this opportunity of announcing that, there and then, I made a little heap of envelope, letter, and will on the hearth, and put a match to them. When every vestige of the paper had been consumed, I stamped the ashes down. I had fingered nothing else. I could safely leave the vile, jaded, forsaken house to reveal its own secret; and I might ensure that this would not be long delayed.

What astonishes me is that, so far as I can see, no other agency but that of this evil old recluse himself had led me to this discovery. Why? Can it have been with this very intention? I stooped down and looked in under the lowered lids in the light of the torch, but not the feeblest flicker, remotest signal or faintest echo of any message rewarded me. Dead fish are less unseemly. And yet, well, we are all capable of remorse and open to repentance. Is it possible that this unutterably priceless blessing is not shut out from us even after all earthly things else appear to have come to an end?

—Home Service